

THE MASTER KEY

By John Fleming Wilson

By special arrangement for this paper a photo-drama corresponding to the incidents of "The Master Key" may now be seen at the leading movie picture theaters. By arrangement made with the Universal Film Manufacturing company it is not only possible to read "The Master Key" in this paper, but also to see the moving pictures of our story.

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CHAPTER XVII.

The Fugitive.

WHEN the train pulled into Los Angeles the next morning John Kane's party got off. John Kane went to the hotel where he was to stay, and Tom Kane went to the hotel where he was to stay.

As they stood there, Wilkerson, Mrs. Darnell and Estelle also got off the train, still disguised, and were hurrying away when Wilkerson observed Ruth and called John's attention to her.

For an instant she was nonplussed. Then she said in a low tone: "So much the better. We can keep an eye out on them."

"I must find out where they are going to," Wilkerson returned. "I don't like the looks of it."

He soon came back with word that they had ordered the car to take them to Beverly Hills.

After some inquiry Wilkerson found the address of a hotel that seemed to answer their requirements, and they were soon on their way thither in a taxi. Within an hour the deft Estelle had installed herself and her mistress in a comfortable suite. Wilkerson took a room near by. Then came the question of their disguises.

"There is no need of wearing them any longer," Wilkerson stated. "If need be we can put them on again."

"Yes, and all the hotel people saw us come in with our disguises on. What will they think if they see entirely different people occupying these rooms?"

Wilkerson had already started to remove his mask. Now he paused. But his reckless nature got the better of him.

He smiled maliciously. "Fargery!" he said, and he laughed at her fears. So they both were soon their real selves and sat down to a hearty breakfast in Mrs. Darnell's room.

This ended, John took the papers and spent an hour going over them carefully. Wilkerson smoked nervously, but did not interrupt her. When she laid the documents down he saw a queer glimmer in her fawny eyes.

"So it has come to the old game, eh?" she said in a low voice. "I thought you had had enough of that."

"Enough of what?" he demanded quickly.

She smiled maliciously. She formed the word slowly and precisely. "Fargery!"

His dark face grew pallid, and his eyes flashed ominously. "I did it for you that time—and no thanks! But this is all right. Those deeds are genuine."

"They merely assure the property to Thomas Gallon and his heirs and assigns. When you found Tom Gallon at last and had him ready to do anything you wanted just as the price of your silence I suppose it didn't occur to you to have him deed over the 'Master Key' mine to you, did it?"

"He wouldn't have done it!" he burst out furiously. "He shot me once. He would have shot me again to save the mine for the girl."

"Then what good are these papers?" Gradually he perceived the drift of her speech. He looked at her for a moment dumbly, as if for instruction. But she was ruthless. He must propose the crime himself. She handed him the papers.

He stared at them and then glanced across at Jenn. She was waiting. He cursed her under his breath. She had always been waiting—waiting for him to break the law, to suffer that she might have comforts and jewels and keep unimpaired that beauty that had been his downfall. But the spell worked, as it had worked before.

"I'll have to go out and buy some black beads," he said maliciously. "I may have to look up some other points, too, about these papers."

As he left the room Jenn Darnell looked after him, lazy triumph in her eyes.

"Estelle," she said languidly, "you may dress my hair. I shall go to a matinee this afternoon. If Mr. Wilkerson comes, tell him I am engaged till tonight."

Life at Beverly Hills was a welcome change to Ruth after the strenuous days that had passed since she left the "Master Key" mine.

There were not many at the hotel and the most prominent figure among the guests was a tall, carefully dressed Englishman, so typically the tourist

that the old cook flinched on identifying him on the register.

"I ain't seen many of the new kinds of people," he explained. "I've been out in the mine so many years that the styles in real genteel has kind of escaped me. I admit to know just what kind of birds I'm meeting with."

"Who is he?" he asked Ruth, as they gazed out at the rising hills.

"He's marked down as Sir Donald Faversham, and he's from the British Isles," Tom Kane rejoined. "He is here for his health, they say. I suppose that's why he has to wear those white ankle warmers on his legs."

"Those are called spats, Tom," said John, smiling. "That eyeglass is a monstrosity."

"Does he see through it?" inquired Kane, with apparent anxiety. "I reckoned he was near sighted, for I spoke to him a while ago and he didn't even see me."

Oddly enough, Ruth blushed at this. Sir Donald had seen her, and she had been made aware of it instantly; not that Sir Donald had been in the slightest offensive. He had merely silently testified by respectful glances his appreciation of the arrival of a very pretty woman.

John Dorr saw the blush and interpreted it rightly. He, too, had observed the Englishman's sudden interest in the lovely girl. For the first time he felt a sharp twinge of jealousy. He had so long been alone in Ruth's regard that he had not analyzed his own feelings toward her. He determined that Sir Donald Faversham should not impose his company on them.

The very next morning, when Ruth and John came out from the hotel ready for a stroll, Faversham lay in wait for the old cook and asked him for a match for his cigarette. Tom reached into his waistcoat pocket and pulled out a bunch of black matches, which he handed out with an air of doing a service to some one he could not see. Sir Donald looked at the queer matches, not knowing the peculiarities of the western sulphur article, and in spite of himself Kane had to instruct him to pull off one of the matches and strike it. When Sir Donald choked and spluttered over an inhalation of brimstone Tom looked profoundly concerned.

"They're a little strong for some people," he remarked pityingly.

"Strong?" answered Faversham, wiping his eyes. "I should jolly well like them!"

Their conversation had attracted Ruth's attention, and she and John both looked back. John smiled faintly, but Ruth was indignant.

"Tom did that on purpose," she said. "I'm ashamed of him."

How it happened only Sir Donald could have told, but within three minutes he was exchanging remarks about the scenery with them all. "And there's an awfully jolly bit just over the other way," he said to Ruth.

The ice was broken, and Ruth promptly accepted the implied invitation to see this specially lovely scene and Sir Donald led the way, talking with her. After an instant's hesitation John and Kane followed.

The acquaintance thus made was destined to have a great bearing on the lives of both Ruth and John. It had ripened into a genuine liking on Ruth's part before the dance that night was over.

The next morning John and Tom met Ruth walking with Sir Donald about the hotel grounds, and the young man could not help showing in both voice and manner that he was little pleased that Ruth should have so suddenly taken up with a stranger.

"Remember, she's only a girl," Tom warned him, feeling his mood. "She's been brought up in the mountains, and she's as friendly as a pup. I don't like the way the can puts petticoats on his feet and I'm used to being looked at with two eyes, but Ruth is all right. You must remember that young as she is and inexperienced, she has a good lot of common sense."

"I suppose it's foolish of me," John answered. "But I'm used to activity, and this dawdling about doesn't suit me and that makes me generally cross and unreasonable. If I only knew what Wilkerson was doing! If Everett would only come!"

The wish was fulfilled that afternoon when George Everett turned up and was warmly greeted by both Kane and Dorr. After a few words he asked for Ruth.

"You can see that she's all right," John answered quietly, pointing to her as she came up the steps with Sir Donald. Both were in tennis garb, and Ruth was delightfully flushed.

Sir Donald made a few pleasant remarks and then excused himself. His quick senses told him that Everett had come on business and that he would be one too many.

"I don't know that I have anything new and startling to tell you," Everett told Ruth in answer to her question. "I know a dozen places where I can raise the money to finance your mine, but we must have the deeds, papers and surveys first. And they're gone, I understand."

"Yes," Dorr replied bitterly. "I suppose Wilkerson has them. I ought to have been on his trail long ago."

Everett glanced at him and saw the disappointment on her face. He went quickly on: "However, I've made temporary arrangements which will relieve you of all trouble for the present, Miss Dorr. I'll talk over the business details with John and Tom Kane."

The bright and bold one hand affectionately on John's arm. "I knew everything would come out all right when John took hold," she said softly.

For two days Harry Wilkerson worked steadily and secretly in his room. At last his task was done.

"No one can ever prove that old Tom Kane didn't draw that deed himself," Wilkerson said triumphantly. "And it makes me the owner of the 'Master Key' mine, Jenn. And, once in charge, I'll make us both worth millions!"

She shrank back at the flame in his eyes upon her.

"Now, what are you going to do?" she demanded, attempting to bring the conversation back into business channels.

He bit his nails savagely. "Drake to get it right," he told her. "You see, Kane didn't turn up to prosecute the case, and they turned him loose. What do you say to my wiring him to go and take charge of the mine while we decide just what to do? He can see what's going on and warn us."

"Dorr and the rest are still at Beverly Hills," she inquired.

"Sure!" he said scornfully. "They're tying up with some bloated Britisher they think has money. They figure on getting him to finance them, I reckon. And I happen to know that Sir Donald couldn't finance anybody. We needn't worry about Dorr."

Mrs. Darnell remained in thoughtful silence awhile and then agreed to the suggestion. Wilkerson immediately wrote the message:

Charles Drake, San Francisco, Cal.: Go to Silent Valley at once and take charge of "Master Key" mine until you hear further from me. Am wiring Tubbs, engineer, to this effect.

HARRY WILKERSON.

When he had sent this and a message to Tubbs he resumed his gloating contemplation of his forged deeds. He did not see the look of burning scorn on Jenn's face as she left the room.

"Why must I always have to use foots?" she murmured bitterly. "A lovely pale-Wilkerson and Drake!"

Drake did not hesitate when he received Wilkerson's telegram. He took the next train for Silent Valley and on arrival there procured a rig and drove to the mine.

On his arrival he was dismayed to see that no work was being done. The machinery was idle, and the miners were loafing about the streets or gathered in little sullen groups. They eyed him curiously, but when he asked for Tubbs they made no comment nor asked any questions.

Following their directions, he soon found himself on the porch of what had been John Dorr's house. He knocked, and there was shuffling of heavy boots; then the door opened, and an unshaven, bloated faced man asked him gruffly what he wanted.

Drake produced Wilkerson's wire, and instantly the engineer showed relief.

"Come in! Come in!" he said. "Come in and have a drink!"

The interior of the cabin showed that Bill Tubbs had apparently been merely camping out in his new quarters with out regard to the decency. But Drake was not squeamish after his long trip and shared a drink with his host. A few words served to put the situation before him.

"There ain't no money to pay the men; the store's closed; the cook shanty ain't running; Wilkerson is away; Dorr hasn't turned up with the money he promised, and I'm just kind of sitting on the lid while the pot boils. I'm mighty glad to see you. Maybe you can do something with these fellows. I've done my best, and I can't do any more."

The words were hardly out of his mouth before there was the noise of boots on the porch, and Tubbs smiled in sickly fashion.

"I guess they spotted you right off," he said.

"What do they want?" demanded Drake as there came a pounding on the door.

Two miners entered, and Tubbs introduced them to Drake.

"This is the new boss, boys," he said. "Was sent you here?" was the first question asked.

"Wilkerson," responded Drake. "Humph!"

"I'm just here to take charge temporarily," Drake went on hastily, not liking the ugly tone of the man's voice.

The other man took this information and after digesting it said, "Going to start up and pay wages?"

"I'm not acquainted with the situation yet," was the evasive reply. "I'll go over things with Mr. Tubbs tonight, and then in the morning I'll see what is to be done."

"The first thing is to give us money and food," was the curt answer. The men stamped out, leaving Drake to look at Tubbs in some dismay.

The engineer was so relieved at having some one else to bear the burden of responsibility that he refused to be worried.

"Have another drink, partner," he said familiarly, "and forget it till tomorrow."

After a very poor meal which Tubbs scraped up, the two sat down and smoked. Tubbs' tongue gradually loosened under the influence of many more drinks, and before 10 o'clock brought up a wailing moan Drake knew a great deal that made him uncomfortable. He decided to shift the burden to Wilkerson's shoulders as quickly as possible.

The next morning did not bring cheer. His heart ached from the fumes of Bill Tubbs' whiskey, and the chill of the mountain air was not dissipated by a cold breakfast. And before the sun had risen above the peak of the mountain the miners had approached him with questions.

CHAPTER XVIII.

The Battle in the Mine.

OR an hour or so Drake equivocated and tried to postpone action. But it was made plain to him that he could not avoid action. The starving men were in no humor for words. They demanded food and wages.

At last he saw that he must do something immediately. He called some of the leaders into the office and with apparent frankness told them he had known nothing of the situation and that he felt sure Wilkerson was unaware of it.

"What are you going to do?" came the demand.

"This," replied Drake, writing rapidly. He showed them the message: Harry Wilkerson, Los Angeles, Cal.: Come to mine at once. Trouble is brewing.

DRAKE.

"Will that bring him?" demanded one of them coldly.

"It will. Now who will take it and send it?"

Two men volunteered to take old Tom Kane's burro and make the trip. "And while you're in Silent Valley," Drake said, yielding to a sudden inspiration, "take this \$20 and get some grub for the camp."

"There's still some locked up in the cook house," said another. "It's old Tom Kane's lookout, so we didn't exactly feel like taking it."

Drake turned to Tubbs quickly. "Distribute the food as far as it will go," he said.

Tubbs looked suddenly serious. "I guess you better leave that to me," he said in a low voice. "I know where it will do the most good." He winked slyly.

Meantime John Dorr, Everett and Tom Kane were spending long hours in discussing what was to be done to save the "Master Key" to Ruth. Tom once more went over the exact situation at the mine and asserted that unless prompt measures were taken not only would there be actual distress, but likely rioting.

"You know some of the worst ones hang with Wilkerson," he said grimly, "and they might at any time take it into their heads to do a little dynamiting. Dynamiting is mighty dangerous stuff around several thousand dollars' worth of machinery, and if they blew up the workings there wouldn't be a mine left, you see."

"I see," said Everett at last. "Not having the papers, I can't put this deal through the way I want to eventually. But something must be done on the spot."

"In the way of money?" added Kane harshly.

"Precisely," Everett assented with all cheerfulness. "Now I'm going to loan John Dorr here \$5,000 today for the 'Master Key' mine. Then—"

John shook his head. "That isn't business-like," he protested.

Everett fixed his keen eyes on him. "Any reason why I shouldn't loan money to Miss Ruth Gallon's manager and guardian? Any reason why you, looking after her interests, should refuse help in fixing up her affairs?"

Dorr flushed. "I didn't mean it that way. It seems as if I kind of messed things up myself, and I thought I might get 'em right by myself."

"You called on me, and I'm the doctor," said Everett authoritatively. He pulled out his wallet and commenced counting out bills. "I came prepared for this, for I thought there might be an emergency."

"But who will take charge of it? Who will go to the mine?"

The broker laughed at him. "Not you. You'd be in a fight in three minutes, specially if Wilkerson turned up. Tom Kane is our man." He turned on the old man abruptly. "Will you take this money and go?"

The old cook stared at the crisp bills and then at Dorr. "I ain't handled paper worth that much lately," he remarked. "But if you want me to go in there and feed them people and get 'em back to work and keep things going till John can fix things up here I'll go."

On his way to the mine Harry Wilkerson's courage, newly fired by a last conversation with Jean Darnell, commenced to ebb.

Drake and Tubbs received him with unaffected relief. A few words sufficed to make the status of affairs plain. Tubbs looked at his superior with strained anxiety in his bearded eyes. Dull and sodden with liquor as he was, he understood perfectly that everything depended on the next few days. The engineer had lived in mining camps and on the desert all his life, and he knew the passions engendered by the arid mountains and the remorseless desert. What would Wilkerson do? Was he strong enough to handle these men who were ready for anything, even to bloodshed if aroused?

Wilkerson had lost his sense of fear oddly enough. As he had come into the c up a dozen miners had recognized him and scowled. He had felt their hatred, and it fed the man's sinister passion to do harm, to hurt, to destroy. Now he faced Drake and Tubbs arrogantly.

"It won't be long till these chaps find out who's the boss," he said. With a significant look at Drake he pulled out the forged deeds and handed them to Tubbs.

"Those men that I'm legally the

owner of the 'Master Key' mine," he announced.

The engineer peered at them dully. He haltingly mumbled over some of the legal phrases at the beginning, saw the names Thomas Gallon and Harry Wilkerson prominently displayed. He was impressed. He did not understand the purport of the papers. He did understand that Wilkerson was smiling with the insolence of triumph achieved. He grinned slowly and passed the papers back.

"I guess that'll fix 'em!" he said huskily.

"I guess it will," was the rejoinder. Tubbs seemed thoughtful, glancing out of the window now and again. Drake voiced his feeling.

"The sooner you let the miners know and get things settled the better."

Wilkerson licked his dry lips. The battle was on. He broke the silence by saying gruffly, "Call 'em up here, Bill!"

Nothing loath, Tubbs went out on the porch, and his hoarse tones resounded through the little valley. Instantly men appeared from doorways, car a from a dozen places in response to that call. And women, clutching their children, peered out to see what was in the air.

When the men were gathered before him Wilkerson stepped forward and commenced to speak. He could not break their sullen silence, and, after a few words of generalities, he mustered his courage and shouted: "I am the owner of this mine! I have the deeds right here!"

The effect of this was far other than he had expected. Not a murmur came from the still, motionless throng. It was as if they had not heard him. In a lower tone he repeated it. "I am the owner of the 'Master Key' mine and all that goes with it."

He held up the papers, and Bill Tubbs looked at them and gravely nodded his head, as much as to say that he had inspected them and could vouch for their authenticity. Still no sound from the miners.

There is a quality in the silence of the crowd of earnest men that is more questioning than any word could be. The men who had worked and toiled for old Tom Gallon, who had been deceived and baffled, who had had their loyalty tested to the utmost, now demanded through their imperious silence that Wilkerson open up his mind to them. If he was indeed the owner of the "Master Key," what did he intend to do?

"You'd better say some more quickly," warned Drake in a low tone. And Wilkerson, completely bewildered, set the match to the powder. He stepped forward with as ugly a look as he could assume and cried, "Now tell me what you want?"

Instantly the air was filled with roars of rage and disappointment.

Fifteen minutes later Harry Wilkerson was sweating within the cabin. With a shaking hand he poured himself out a tumbler of Tubbs' whiskey. He had promised the miners' back pay, steady work, full wages and food. He must make good, and he did not know how.

"Tubbs," he said sharply, "you must find out what men we can trust. Say nothing, but get all the information you can. I'll make it worth the while of the men who'll stick by me."

Again the engineer checked fatuously. "They'll all stick by 'em," he said sagely, "as long as you pay 'em like you said you would."

It was late in the afternoon when Tom Kane appeared on the main wagon. The driver had already informed him of how affairs were going, and the cook wanted no time. He climbed down from the high seat, jerked his battered case out of the wagon and made straight for his shanty. Within five minutes he had divested himself of his black clothes and donned his official overalls and apron. Then he appeared on the porch as calm and unconcerned as though he had not been away.

In no time at all a couple of dozen miners had gathered to shake hands and swap news. Naturally their biggest item was Wilkerson's proclamation of ownership.

At this Tom Kane laughed scornfully. He derided the papers, ridiculed the miners for being fools easily taken in and stated in set terms that he, Tom Kane, actually held the place of authority.

This soon came to Wilkerson's ears, and he hurried down the hill to stop what he knew to be a dangerous session. Instantly the old cook looked horns with him, postpooled him to his face, called him names of secular violence and offered to fight him on any terms.

Before long the camp was in an uproar, and it was due to certain cooler heads that trouble did not ensue immediately. These men insisted that there was time to settle the dispute of ownership, forced Wilkerson to withdraw his command that Kane leave the mine instantly and managed to bring a semblance of peace out of disorder. Kane bowed his neck to the yoke of their authority, but dispatched a trusty messenger to the station with a telegram to John to come as soon as possible. Wilkerson resorted to a scene which was eventually to threaten the very existence of the "Master Key." He sent Drake south to confer with a desperado whom he knew, who could gather a band of Mexicans like himself on short notice, ready for anything that promised loot.

"Tell John to be here tomorrow night," he instructed him. "I'll want about twenty men well armed."

Drake rode away as from destruction, cursing the luck that had put him in the power of such a man.

In response to Kane's message John Dorr, Ruth Gallon and Everett left Beverly Hills for Silent Valley. They arrived the third day after the cook, and from the moment they were recognized the miners dropped their attitude of sullen waiting and thronged about their mistresses, cheering and shaking hands. When they had got into the big house Kane arrived, apro-

pos and, to report on the situation.

"It's come to a showdown," he remarked. "Wilkerson has several of the worthless fellows here and a lot of half breeds back in the hills. He knows I have that money of yours, and he's promised it to the Mexicans if they help him. You see, Wilkerson will keep his skirts clear that way. He can say that it was a mild by-blandia."

"How soon does all this happen?" growled John.

Kane glanced at him curiously. He understood that warning not to frighten Ruth and went on airily. "Oh, I reckon just as soon as Wilkerson gets Tubbs wadded from that bottle of his."

But when Ruth had gone to her own rooms the cook wasted no words in smoothing things over.

"You've got to act and act quick," he told John and Everett. "It ain't the time for fooling. Tonight may do the business, for those Mexicans are impatient. Remember that Wilkerson has the keys to the powder house, and he has all kinds of chance to lay his traps."

"I don't think he expected us so soon," John remarked.

"A good cook always has grub for people that drop in unexpected like," was the grim response. "Just take a peek down there now."

Through the window John saw that the camp was quietly but surely dividing into two parties. The elder miners were gathered about the cook shanty. Around the office stood a dozen or so malcontents half drunk under the leadership of Tubbs, who was wholly drunk, and on the porch talking to Wilkerson were a couple of Mexicans.

"It looks as if they meant to rush the camp," Dorr said thoughtfully. He proceeded to arm himself, and Everett quietly followed suit.

"I'm going to talk to the boys first," said Dorr. He left the bungalow and strode off down the hill, followed by the cook. A gun was fired up by the mine tunnel mouth.

"That's a signal that the Mexicans are making trouble," Kane shouted. "Look out for dynamite in the shaft, John!"

Without a word further Dorr leaped down from the porch of the cook shanty and started up the hill, followed by a dozen faithful supporters. Other shots were fired. Wilkerson appeared at the tunnel mouth and then vanished inside. John sprang upon the trestle and rushed after him.

Instantly a band of Mexican materialized halfway down the hill, fired a few shots and retreated. John paid no attention to them, but kept on.

Once within the tunnel he saw a faint gleam of light ahead of him. He understood that Kane was right. Wilkerson was playing a desperate game in blowing up the shaft and then in the ensuing confusion allowing the bandits to loot undisturbed.

A few yards further on John stopped. A dark figure rushed by him toward the open air. But the little glow of light remained. For a moment Dorr hesitated; then he leaped forward and began trying to extinguish a lighted fuse.

He had almost succeeded when a bullet whizzed by him, then a second splattered on the rock overhead. He turned and fired blindly in the direction of the shots and resumed his task. The fuse was short, but he succeeded in extinguishing it and started back. He met a fusillade of bullets.

He dashed on toward the mouth of the tunnel and suddenly emerged on Wilkerson, who, not being able to see into the muck of the shaft, was firing blindly into the opening.

With a shout John leaped for the man whom he now knew to be seeking his life. Before Wilkerson could fire another shot he was caught in a sharp struggle high in the air.

John Dorr for the first time in his life knew the absolute and terrible thrill for killing that sometimes comes to a man. It was either his life or Wilkerson's. And no one should interfere with his revenge. He threw himself on the man with but one object in view—to slay him bare handed.

Wilkerson fought tigerishly, and for the moment had the advantage. The lofty trestle was an ill place for a heavy man like Dorr to fight on, and the man's agility and little quickness seemed about to win when John by a sudden unexpected and desperate maneuver caught him and threw him clear into the air, breaking his clutch with a terrific blow. Then he